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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that for institutions of higher education, the nature, extent, and duration of cultural change are directly related to concurrent social, technological, and organizational changes. It outlines social changes since World War II and suggests that the results of cumulative change in the past account for much of the current pressure for sudden or radical change. Discussion of organizational change finds that colleges and universities with hierarchical structures and centralized staffs are likely to experience pressures to diversify their various functions, programs, services, and activities and at the same time resist change. Implications of the rush to embrace technological innovations at institutions of higher education are considered. Also addressed are implications of cultural changes in society that result in the teaching and research interests of faculty lagging behind the learning needs and interests of students. The paper concludes with an emphasis on the importance of continuity in institutional leadership and perspectives that are historical, comparative, and developmental. (Contains 13 references.) (DB)

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Cultural Change and Continuity

by Cameron Fincher

The rapidity and magnitude of cultural change in the closing years of the 20th century has persuaded some observers that we are now engaged in "cultural wars" that will determine the telling characteristics of the next decade, century, or millennium that arrives in the year 2000. Others would contend that we have been engaged in ideological struggles since the 1930s and suggest that *culture* is a much abused idea around which swirls a great deal of confusion and many mistaken beliefs.

Within the "cultural wars" discussed in the 1990s are significant changes in the demands and expectations of state and society, in national and regional trends, in the sociocultural context of higher education, and in international relations. The forces influencing cultural change include, therefore, the momentous changes that occurred in the brief span of six years: 1989 through 1994. Changes in military leadership, advanced technology, technical training, and multinational cooperation were demonstrated dramatically in the Persian Gulf War. The social, political, and economic impact of technological and cultural forces were displayed daily by events taking place in western and eastern Europe, by the uncertain role of new nations formerly under soviet domination, and by the economic emergence of Asian-Pacific nations in a competitive global economy.

For individuals, changes in their daily lives have been influenced appreciably by the conditions and circumstances of their generation, as well as the time and place of the institutions or organizations they serve. How each generation responds or adapts to rapid and continuing change thus is a matter of significance and interest to following generations. Assuming that related changes will occur in the situational demands of higher education, the observable cultural changes are relevant to the effectiveness of colleges and universities in meeting the changing demands and expectations of their constituencies. In brief, for institutions of higher education, as well as in state and society, the nature, extent, and duration of cultural change is directly related to social, technological, and organizational changes taking place concurrently.

Social Change

The demographic shifts taking place since WWII were increasingly evident in the 1980s as the postwar generation reached adulthood and assumed positions of leadership. In 1992 the babyboomers ranged in age from 28 years to 46 years; in November of 1992 a babyboomer candidate for the presidency of the U.S. defeated a World War II veteran. Seldom has a succession of generations been more evident in national leadership. And seldom has a national election reflected more clearly the impact of political pluralism in a society that takes great pride in its diversity *(See Levine, et al., 1989).*

In 1998 many signs point to another generation gap. By 2001 the oldest babyboomers will be fifty-five years old and the oldest babybusters will be thirty-seven. Early in the 21st century, therefore, the babyboomers will be in complete charge of the nation's colleges and universities—*if* the babybusters will follow

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their lead. The substance and style of leadership will be influenced significantly by the personal qualities, situational demands, and role expectations of aging babyboomers. Their performance and effectiveness in institutional leadership, however, will be influenced by gradual, incremental changes in students, faculty, alumni, and trustees.

Babyboomers and babybusters, as all generations must, vary within themselves and differ significantly from other generations. In other words, differences within generations will usually exceed differences between generations. The differences between babyboomers born in 1946 and those born in 1964 are quite pronounced and no generation gap is more relevant, perhaps, than the different expectations of babyboomers who arrived early and those who came later.

In the fall of 2001, typical first-year students in higher education will have been born in 1983, entered the first grade in 1989, and graduated from high school in the spring of 2001. Many college and university professors (and academic administrators) will have been babyboomers who were college students during the turbulent years of 1968-1973. In other words, the incremental changes taking place since 1964 now have the cumulative effect of a generation gap between babyboomers and babybusters, as well as an intra-generation gap within the babyboomers. To some observers the generation gaps that are observable in 1998 are more relevant to the education of future leaders than those observed in the 1960s. As a result, the implications of incremental change will be a challenge throughout the first decade of the next century.

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In addition to the changing composition of students, faculties, and alumni, there have been many changes in public perceptions, expectations, and values concerning higher education and its numerous (3600+) colleges and universities. Institutions of higher education are still perceived as public resources that must be shared—if not equitably, then proportionately—with national constituencies. At the same time, demands for the internationalization of college curricula and for cultural pluralism would share institutional resources, advantages, and benefits within a global community that has yet to define itself. In some demands we may detect the morals and mentality of corporate raiders; if it is necessary to dismantle our institutions of higher learning for all shareholders to receive their fair share, then do so and let participants invest their shares elsewhere. Thus, it is quite plausible that the results of cumulative change in the past account for much of the pressure for sudden or radical change in the current decade *(See Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992; Curry, 1992).*

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The changing structure and functions of organizations and institutions in contemporary society produce a similar challenge. Here again, many changes are gradual and their impact is due to the accumulation of increments. The pressures for organizational change, however, are more likely to come from the perception of defects that are recently evident. Organizational change, as advocated in organizational restructuring, reflect adaptive, responsive changes in a highly competitive world. Organizational design (or redesign) thus becomes attractive in higher education because of our past receptivity to organizational development, the managerial revolution, and other fashionable movements such as strategic planning *(Bryson, 1995).*

In the past institutions of higher education have responded to demands for change with *ad hoc* or expedient solutions—and with some semblance of altruistic motives. But in all such efforts, there have been a deep-seated ambivalence toward alterations in collegial, divisional, or departmental structures. Research

centers, laboratories, and institutes have been established in eager response to outside funding—and they have just as quickly been abolished when outside funding was withdrawn. More often than not, centers and institutes are established with explicit assurances to funding agencies that the institution will continue their work when external funding may no longer be available. Thus, a noticeable inconsistency of research universities is their display of organizational creativity when stimulated by promises of additional funding and their ineptness in devising satisfactory organizational structures for the solution of internal problems.

The advocacy of organizational change in the 1990s is quite appealing. Within corporate business, industry, and finance there are many challenges to the established order. Among these are the changing nature of the workforce, the identities of business corporations, and the need for "time-based competition" in international markets. Such challenges call for a realignment of organizational structure, management, internal operations, and reward systems. The maturity and sophistication of organizational psychology give an added emphasis to teamwork, team building, and incentives for team productivity. Clearly evident is the belief that organizational learning, development, and maturity are needed to restore competitive advantage. Asian-Pacific countries, for example, have an advantage in world markets where low labor costs are a major determinant. Business corporations with elaborate line and staff structures cannot compete successfully in such markets *(Berquist, 1993; Bolman & Deal, 1991; Galbraith, Lawler, and Associates, 1993)*.

The changing nature of organization in contemporary societies suggests that hierarchical, bureaucratic forms of control must be replaced by methods that are more responsive to constituent, customer, or peer demands. In turn, self-managing work teams replace middle managers and supervisors. The pressures for organizational change presume, in various ways, that different strategies lead to different structures. Colleges and universities with hierarchical structures and centralized staffs will experience similar pressures as they continue to diversify their various functions, programs,

Clearly evident is the belief that organizational learning, development, and maturity are needed to restore competitive advantage.

services, and activities. Unfortunately, the need for reform in higher education is an old and worn theme. Organizational innovations, when forced upon relative autonomous institutions, are either resisted or accommodated in ways that do not serve the long-term interests of colleges and universities.

TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

The incremental effects of technological innovation and its rapid acceleration have resulted in a far more subtle, but no less important, challenge to the future of leadership, institutions, and standards of living. The ease and rapidity with which data, information, knowledge, and funds are transmitted across national borders are forces with which all societal institutions must cope. More and more business transactions are conducted with stockmarket haste and an unseemly lack of deliberation; "turn-around time" is now the criterion by which the effectiveness of many decisions is judged.

But more important for institutions of higher learning is the influence of technological innovations on the nature and content of communication *per se*. Methods and techniques of communication have many adverse effects on the ways in which we communicate with colleagues, what we are able to accomplish through communication with others, and the ways in which we actually think, speak, listen, write, and read. Our methods of communication also influence what we remember, what we recall, and how we use the substance or content of transmitted messages in policy decisions,

organizational problem solving, and conflict resolution.

In the 1950s many institutions struggled in their efforts to adapt data processing techniques to the issuance of paychecks and the recording of grades. In the 1990s many institutions purchase wholesale desktop computers to improve the scholarly productivity of faculty members who quickly adopt the words and phrases of computer-ese but who may not master the basic concepts of computer science and technology. Where institutions have been reluctant (in the past) to adopt technological innovations, they now rush to embrace novel techniques of communication; they do so without awareness that change of any significant magnitude takes time to assimilate and to use or apply. In all forms of technological change we must learn what innovative methods and techniques mean *and* we must learn how to live with the changes they cause in their users.

To understand change, we need perspectives that are historical, comparative, and developmental—perspectives that do not exclude continuity with the past.

CULTURAL CHANGE

The quiet and often unnoticed changes that take place in societal traditions, customs, beliefs, values, and daily routines have innumerable implications for institutions and their multiple constituencies. As a rule, cultural change is aided and abetted by technological improvements that promise a better way of living. As a continuing source of ideological conflict, however, cultural change may be both a spur and a rein to the kind of cultural progress we have experienced in the past. Cultural change, as reflected in the declining quality of life for many Americans and as seen in the debilitating effects of ideological conflict, needs no celebration in the closing years of the 20th century.

The adoption of "other perspectives" can serve many useful purposes in institutions responsible for the creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge. When new or different perspectives reject the intellectual heritage of modern universities, however, they make a dubious contribution to student learning and achievement. Accepting the generation gap discussed above, there are reasons to believe that faculty members who are nostalgic about the 1960s are handicapped mentorially to instruct students of the baby-buster generation. The teaching and research interests of faculty members have long been at variance with the learning needs and interests of students in higher education. To exacerbate such differences in teachers and learners is to widen and deepen the generation gap that separates them.

Much the same can be said for schisms between teaching faculty and academic administrators who are responsible for curricular change. As the one area of responsibility in which faculty governance is warranted, the curriculum is not noted for the rapidity with which it can be changed. To the contrary, one writer *(Hefferlin, 1969)* has estimated that it takes an average of twenty-two years for the curriculum to change under its own incremental momentum. Virtually all faculty members resist curricular changes that are proposed by others. They can and do change course requirements gradually, and they continuously alter in subtle ways fields of specialization and degree requirements. But they do so under the supposition that such changes are within the bounds of their academic freedom. The implications for continuing conflict are thus clear. As the ideological content of many courses strays from the intellectual and cultural content institutions of higher learning are best prepared to disseminate, federal and state courts may be called upon to consider internal conflicts that institutions themselves should resolve.

Among the implications of cultural change for institutional effectiveness, there are dysfunctions in contemporary society that may be inimical to positive, constructive leadership.

The failures of leadership have been attributed by one avidly read author to an unconscious conspiracy that prevents leaders from attending to issues and concerns of importance. For the most part, the conspiracy takes the form of foolish, trivial, or hostile demands on the leader's limited time and energy. In this perspective, the great leaders are gone and too many persons in positions of authority are agents of adjustment who merely tinker with the machinery *(Bennis, 1989)*.

Other observers and critics of national, military, corporate, and community leadership are equally attentive to the increasing complexity of organizational and institutional life. Associations and organizations proliferate in response to changing demands and expectations for a more active role in the formation of public policy. Agencies of federal, state, and local government are established in the public interest to protect the environment, to further social justice, to cope with domestic crises, and to perform numerous other duties that are regarded as essential by one or more organized groups. All such agencies, associations, and organizations require leadership *(Fincher, 1987)*.

THE MEANING OF CONTINUITY

The pressures for change in the 1990s are much too similar (for complacency) to the demands for radical change in the 1960s and early 1970s *(Fenrock, 1971; Drucker, 1980)*. A tragic mistake at that time was the belief that immediate and enduring change could be made without regard for its antecedents or its consequences. The intensity of belief was mistaken for proof of validity and utility. Public expectations for organizational change in the 1990s reflect the frustration of coping with changes observed in the 1980s. They also reflect the demographic shifts, publicized changes in multinational corporations, and conflicting signals that have built up over the past years. Within higher education there should be no doubt about the conflicting demands of institutional constituencies, corporate business, federal and state government, and the general public. Public expectations for higher education are much too high, and the divisive forces within society, government, and institutions of higher learning signify the collision course on which we are traveling.

To understand change, we need perspectives that are historical, comparative, and developmental—perspectives that do not exclude continuity with the past. We should understand better what has gone before, we should be aware of similarities and differences, and we should appreciate the role of internal processes that have their own momentum. Continuity in institutional leadership is particularly important because of the excessive costs involved in "a change of administrations."When changes in leadership are essential to institutional effectiveness, well-being, public image, or faculty morale, every effort should be made to de-mystify the process of presidential succession. All changes in leadership involve the continuance of ongoing functions and activities, the assessment of strengths as well as weaknesses, and the selective reinforcement of institutional resources and reputation.

When the structure and functions of an organization change, we should ask *not only* how they differ from previous structures and functions, *but* in what ways are they similar, and which is more significant: the similarities or the differences? If we can answer such questions satisfactorily, we are in a much better position to assess, evaluate, or judge the value or worth of the change we observe—and surely, we are a better position to understand cultural change as a continuing process.❖

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THIS ISSUE . . .

Since its beginning in 1964, the Institute of Higher Education has published occasional papers, monographs, and newsletters dealing with selected topics of interest to academic administrators, faculty members, and professional staff. With this issue, the title of our IHE NEWSLETTER is changed to IHE PERSPECTIVES, as a means of reflecting the substantive trends, problems, and issues with which the IHE staff is professionally concerned. Dated June 1998, this issue also signifies the Institute's completion of thirty-four years as an instruction, research, and service agency of the University of Georgia. The second issue of IHE PERSPECTIVES will be dated August 1998 — with reserved expectations that future issues will be published occasionally as staff time permits.